



Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP)

Humboldt Park, on the northwest side of Chicago, is a predominantly Latino and African-American community. The neighborhood's Latino character is, more specifically, Puerto Rican, with a strong presence of Mexican immigrants as well. Although it is still a poor, inner city neighborhood, its location has put it in the path of gentrification, radiating outward from Chicago's downtown, Gold Coast, and Lincoln Park areas.

To the community residents and 110 organizations involved in the Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), becoming a target of gentrification is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, fighting the neighborhood's poverty requires the types of economic opportunities that might attract even more gentrification. Yet if this unfolds, residents fear they will be displaced by higher rents and property values – which indeed has already been the case. Analyzing this dilemma, Partnership members realized that *both* poverty and gentrification reflect conditions of powerlessness. Their focus became creating and channeling economic opportunities that would benefit community residents. How? By building community capacity, leadership, and empowerment – and, in the process, gaining control over the process and accountability to the community itself.

The Partnership was formed in 1996 by disadvantaged community residents with the goal of developing a strategic plan required for a \$100 million application to have the neighborhood designated an Empowerment Zone. The application failed, but the strategic plan – and the relationships and community involvement that led to its creation – survived. HPEP members believe that the failure to gain

Empowerment Zone status was actually a blessing in disguise, because they have had to rely on each other, not outsiders, to accomplish their goals. Doing so has been a uniquely empowering experience. (And they have managed to leverage over \$55 million in business investment for commercial, industrial, and real estate development on their own – over half the original Empowerment Zone amount.)

Countering the Politics of Division

Chicago has a long, bitter history of political corruption and “divide-and-conquer” strategies that pitted whites against brown and black, brown and black against each other, the West Side against the South, the South against the North.

HPEP, in contrast, practices “the politics of multiplication.” In a given year, 25,000 neighborhood residents (out of 133,000) actively participate in Partnership activities, individually or through the 110 neighborhood organizations (block clubs, social service agencies, churches, schools, and others) that form HPEP. Although the neighborhood is known in Chicago as a Puerto Rican neighborhood and many Partnership activities are geared towards preserving this cultural heritage, HPEP itself is multicultural. The neighborhood’s African-American residents, in particular, are active participants in the Partnership; the community’s Puerto Rican identity marks the neighborhood as a unique place that instills pride in all its residents. HPEP pays particular attention to “lifting up” the African heritage of its Latino population and of African Americans and African immigrants who are also part of the neighborhood.

HPEP is governed by a democratically elected Steering Committee, which is accountable to the community. All major policy decisions are made by democratic vote and smaller Action Teams are formed to tackle specific issues (such as education, economic development, housing, and youth development).

The Partnership's members see themselves as matchmakers, creating ways to match the community's many assets with areas of need and/or potential leverage points.

A One-on-One Tradition

HPEP's original strategic plan was created from small group conversations among 3,000 community residents. This tradition is reflected in the Partnership's current operations. Each meeting opens with 20 minutes of "one-on-ones" – conversations between pairs of people that are joint interviews about assets and interests. This deliberate search for common ground has served the Partnership well, fueling meaningful collaboration, breaking down barriers, and giving many different types of members a tangible connection and conduit to the larger group. "One-on-ones model for us a way to get things done by respecting each other," members explain.

New ideas and issues often percolate to the group from a humble start in a one-on-one conversation. For example, a senior resident of the neighborhood asked, during a one-on-one, why the neighborhood had no quality grocery store. The economic development Action Team took up the idea and arranged for a business professor and students from a local university to work with residents on a market study. The study demonstrated the strong demand for a grocery store and was even pitched during a trade visit to Puerto Rico. Groundbreaking on the new store is expected in Spring 2004. In this way, HPEP demonstrates to community residents over and over that their voices are heard and that their issues and concerns are the ones that drive HPEP actions.

Plantando Banderas (Staking Our Claim)

Because HPEP involves so many individuals and organizations as active participants, it can mobilize large numbers of people quickly and effectively. For

example, with the help of a sympathetic Chicago Alderman, the Partnership argued for a Redevelopment Area designation from Chicago's Community Development Commission. Typically, Redevelopment Areas are used to promote gentrification and citizen input is perfunctory (when it occurs at all). In this case, HPEP had a plan for a Redevelopment Area operated from the bottom up, giving control to community members. Over 600 residents traveled to City Hall and packed two floors of galleries, demonstrating their support. The community empowered the Alderman, HPEP organizers recall, the Alderman empowered the community, and "the Commission gave in to our superior planning and preparation!" For the first time, community residents had a say in how property is acquired and sold – and more importantly, they knew they had the collective power to move projects forward or stand in their way. "We are the experts in our community," members remind one another. The experience of gaining control over some aspects of land use in the neighborhood was empowering, instilling a belief in residents' capacity to contribute – a capacity that had been devalued and ignored for so long that people had lost their ability to believe in their own power.

Although no funding accompanied the decision, it did clear the way for pooling community resources and investing them in a new way – to create affordable housing while creating wealth for community residents. The City then delegated control over 150 City-owned vacant lots in the neighborhood, changing the politics of development in Humboldt Park forever. "We have strength in numbers," HPEP members said, "and more than that, we have mutual respect." Developers have to vet their plans before the community-controlled Redevelopment Authority; the community expects developers to subsidize affordable housing in a minimum of a third of new units.

Control over these lots also gives the neighborhood bargaining power. For example, before the community gained control over these types of decisions, a developer had purchased a vacant lot for the princely sum of \$1. This was bad

enough, but the lot happened to be adjacent to a mural, La Crucifixion de Don Pedro, celebrating the heroes of Puerto Rico's liberation struggle. When neighborhood residents saw a cement wall going up in front of the mural with no warning, they felt trapped because the developers owned the property and had the proper zoning. (Because of HPEP's grapevine of one-on-ones and small group relationships, word of the wall spread extraordinarily quickly, allowing neighborhood residents to congregate on the site and shut down construction. Some residents even camped at the site overnight.)

Although the residents were able to temporarily halt construction, they were still left with the problem of how to counter the developer's legal actions. The answer lay in control of other lots, which HPEP offered to trade in order to preserve the one next to the mural. In fact, the mixed-use condominium the developer planned to build was one the community endorsed – just not in that particular location. Negotiations are underway (because the developer is insisting on a trade of several lots for the one next to the mural), but regardless of the specifics of the deal, it looks as if the mural will stand, unobstructed by condominium walls. The fate of the lot is a hot discussion topic at HPEP meetings, with many favoring an open-space park in the site – with the mural of earlier struggles inspiring new ones decades later.

Another outcome of the Partnership's "strength in numbers" approach is that larger entities – local government, corporations, banks, and universities – realize that they have a solid, reliable negotiating partner in the neighborhood and that win-win situations can be crafted, benefiting everyone. Pro-community candidates have won all of the recent local elections; state and city officials work closely with HPEP because they know it is a positive force in the community – and one to be reckoned with.

These broader changes have helped HPEP achieve a number of other land use victories. For example, HPEP was able to expand Section 8 and Housing Tax

Credit rules to make room for new forms of cooperative home ownership. Over 350 new units of affordable housing have been created through HPEP's efforts, in addition to hundreds of other Section and scattered site units. All of this has increased home ownership in the neighborhood by local residents and has had an immediate, measurable impact on one of the indicators HPEP tracks: the number of "For Sale" signs visible around the streets of Humboldt Park. Their neighborhood, HPEP members say, is not for sale. The number of boarded-up buildings – a signal that developers might be holding a property until its value accelerates even further out of reach of local residents – is also down.

The Next Generation

Just as an indicator of gentrification was "For Sale" signs and boarded up buildings, a powerful indicator of violence in the neighborhood was a steady schedule of funerals. "Two years ago," HPEP members recall, "it seemed that we were going to funerals all the time." HPEP's contacts, history of investing in youth development programs, and trusted reputation with different organizations and individuals throughout the multi-ethnic neighborhood led to the successful negotiation of a gang truce. The truce not only led to a dramatic reduction in street violence and murders, but turned around individual lives as well. Today, former gang members are participating in voter registration drives and community music and art projects. Over 500 local young people have participated in a combination of after-school programs, tutoring, health promotion, and youth leadership development efforts. An HPEP community-based school collaborative has increased academic performance in 11 of the city's poorest schools.

Pathways to Collaboration

Humboldt Park is as urban as it gets – an ethnic enclave in a city known for them. Because of HPEP's community-driven collaborative process, that urban

environment is changing. “People now have a voice in their future and what it will be like,” says one of HPEP’s leaders. “By building relationships with key stakeholders and people in decision-making positions, we have been able to listen and to communicate our vision for the future of our community.” Through the efforts of the Partnership, the community’s vision is becoming a reality.

The Pathways Workgroup will give HPEP members an opportunity to understand and share their expertise by exploring how their Partnership has enabled community residents to accomplish so much and by identifying exactly what the Partnership is doing to bring that about. In addition, the Workgroup will enable HPEP to learn not only from other urban partnerships, but from rural ones as well. The Partnership is excited about the opportunity to be involved in this kind of joint learning. As HPEP members tell each other, they are the experts in their own Partnership and community. Through the Workgroup, they are looking forward to engaging in a dialogue with experts from other “cutting edge” community partnerships around the country.